

The Diplomacy of Intervention and Extrication

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San Allchay
perhaps of interest

by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

Knowledge is the object of our inquiry, and men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the "why" of it (which is to grasp its primary cause). . . . In one sense, then, (1) that out of which a thing comes to be and which persists, is called "cause," e.g., the bronze of the statue, the silver of the bowl. . . . In another sense (2) the form or the archetype, i.e., the statement of the essence, and its genera, are called "causes". . . . Again (3) the primary source of the change or coming to rest, e.g., the man who gave advice is a cause, the father is cause of the child, and generally what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed. Again (4) in the sense of end or "that for the sake of which" a thing is done, e.g., health is the cause of walking about.

—Aristotle, *Physics*, Book II, chapter 3

No episode in our history, I believe, will baffle our posterity more than the Indochina war. Many, perhaps most, Americans already find it incredible that we ever considered our national interest so vitally engaged in Vietnam as to justify the death of 50,000 Americans and God knows how many Vietnamese in the longest war Americans have ever fought. Some find it even more incredible, after Vietnam has been burned into

our souls, to watch a new administration a few years later confidently reenact the folly of Vietnam in Cambodia and Laos. "Can we draw no lessons even from the recent past?" Chester Cooper asks in his excellent book. "Must history always start on Inauguration Day?"

*The Lost Crusade** is a story of this mysterious episode told from the viewpoint of an intermittent participant. Cooper served with the Office of Strategic Services in the China-

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**The Lost Crusade* by Chester L. Cooper—Dodd, Mead, 559 pages, \$12.00.

Burma-India theater during World War II; he then moved on to the Central Intelligence Agency, a fact curiously omitted in the biographical note on the book jacket (after OSS, the jacket primly says, Cooper was "a specialist in that area of government"). Though his narrative begins with World War II (where he ably documents the now familiar point that if President Roosevelt had had his way Indochina would have been set up for independence and the world spared much bloodshed and agony), his personal involvement in Vietnam began with the Geneva conference of 1954. It continued through the founding session of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization later that year, the Laos conference in Geneva in 1961, and the Manila conference in 1966. In 1963 he joined McGeorge Bundy's National Security staff at the White House (I knew him then—quiet, unassuming, highly competent, more humor than at first one imagined) and became an assistant to Averell Harriman in 1966 when President Johnson charged, or went through the motions of charging, Harriman with organizing the quest for peace.

Cooper has cast himself for a very minor supporting role in his own story, most of the time providing local color or light comedy, though in the frustrations of the Wilson-Kosygin peace explorations of 1967 (well recounted) he assumes, for a moment, a larger part. He only occasionally tells us what he himself was thinking during these years, so we are never quite clear as to whether he has only recently renounced illusion or was a skeptic all along. I should add that this obscurity plainly derives not from any desire to escape accountability but rather from a natural diffidence that has evidently made him doubt that anyone would care much about the evolution of his own views.

The obscurity may derive too from the fact that Cooper is, by profession, a bureaucrat. He has spent his adult lifetime in the government service, except for his current tour of duty in

the Institute for Defense Analyses (which is practically the same thing). The virtue of the professional civil servant lies in his readiness to execute policy, whatever (within constitutional limits) the policy may be. This is also his vice, especially in our own moralistic age; but no democratic government could work without this ingrained agnosticism in its professional service. Bureaucratic agnosticism is not, of course, total; the bureaucracy has a chronic preference for the accustomed over the novel policy, even for accustomed error as against novel truth. But the exercise of choosing among competing policies on their merits is not ordinarily part of the job.

Cooper is plainly a bureaucrat by profession and possibly by temperament too. Early on, for example, he tells us that "the first official inkling" of American wartime policy toward Indochina came in a State Department memorandum of February, 1944. This seems odd when we learn on the next page that President Roosevelt had told Anthony Eden in March, 1943, he did not want the French back. To the uninitiated this might constitute a moderately official inkling. But, in the true bureaucratic view, a trusteeship for Indochina was only a presidential policy in 1943; when the permanent government wrote a memorandum about it in 1944, then, evidently, it became serious policy.

The bureaucrat's perspective pervades the book. When President Johnson proposed an ambitious regional development program for Southeast Asia in his Johns Hopkins speech in 1965, Cooper complains that "the idea had not been discussed in advance with the experts and technicians and it took them by surprise." One can see Cooper's point here; but the President had a point, too. If he had consulted the experts and technicians, he probably would not have had a development plan; while by announcing a plan he might compel the experts to change their objective. It was in precisely this way that President

Truman and Clark Clifford made the permanent government accept Point Four. On the other hand, the bureaucrat's-eye-view often yields treasures, as, for example, in Cooper's magnificent deadpan account of the administrative disarray wrought by President Johnson's addiction to secrecy, surprise, whim, and unpredictable favoritism. "It was difficult," Cooper recalls, "even for White House staffers to know at any given moment of play which players were in the game and which were not. Sometimes the players themselves could not tell if they were sitting on the bench or were in the scrimmage."

As a professional, Cooper probably went along with the Vietnam policy for a long time without particular approval or disapproval; this may be another reason why he is not too precise about the graph of his own dissent. Still, a bureaucrat, like everyone else, hath eyes, hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; when he is pricked, he too bleeds (in time). The cup of acquiescence can overflow; and the happy result in Cooper's case is this valuable and illuminating book.

It is important to understand what *The Lost Crusade* is not. It is not an account of the fighting in Vietnam; indeed, there is not a great deal in it about Vietnam at all. Nor is it an account of the political or economic impact of the war on American society. It is an account of certain diplomatic aspects of the American involvement. The first part shows the involvement deepening, as seen from Washington. This part is based somewhat on inside observation but rather more on research. The second, and more original, part is a study of the effort at extrication—that is, the peace negotiations of 1966-68—again as seen from Washington. The press has dealt with some of the episodes discussed here, but one never knew exactly how much one could believe. At last we have a detailed and authoritative record.

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note that the question of propriety has not been raised against Cooper. It was only half a dozen years ago when newspapers and other custodians of the public morals started a great clamor against *A Thousand Days* on the ground that it contained blasphemous revelations of sacred mysteries. I remember Sidney Hyman, a Washington writer with historical pretensions, telling one interviewer that the book represented the height (or was it the depth?) of historical irresponsibility. *The Lost Crusade's* enthusiastic reception suggests that contemporary history (or eye-witness material preserved for future historians; as Cooper modestly, and accurately, says, "For now, the observer can only provide grist for the historian's mill") has finally come into its own as a respectable field of endeavor. Certainly no one can doubt that Cooper has performed a patriotic service in letting us know what our masters are really like.

He does this with even temper and good humor. His narrative is brisk and readable, though it lapses too easily into journalese—there are too many sporting similes and too many things come through "loud and clear." He does not at all have the gift for characterization that enriched and enlivened Townsend Hoopes' *Limits of Intervention*, but his canvas is considerably larger. He is *l'homme moyen sensuel*, not given to sensationalism or undue imagination but not easy to fool.

He makes his most useful contribution, I have suggested, in his analysis of the peace negotiations. "Prospects for negotiation," he says, were "dim in early 1966"—the North Vietnamese had no interest in "any terms other than the surrender of the United States"; but, even if Hanoi had by any chance been interested, the Johnson method was "plainly unsuitable. Where finely tooled instruments were required, we used a sledgehammer." Moreover, Washington itself was "unprepared for negotiations"; at a later point, when Arthur Goldberg proposed in the United Nations a bombing halt in exchange for assur-

ances of de-escalation, "there were many in the Administration," Cooper writes, "who were noticeably relieved when 48 hours later both Hanoi and Peking unequivocally rejected Goldberg's proposals." In November, 1966, he thinks, "The Johnson Administration embarked on a sustained search for a way out"; but it is hard to see what the Administration decided then, beyond assigning the job to Harriman and Cooper. Cooper's own account of subsequent developments would justify a much less charitable description of the Johnson policy.

Thus he notes the American government's quite remarkable capacity to sabotage its own peace efforts. "The Administration, as of late 1966 and early 1967, was just not interested in negotiations to the extent necessary to prevent military action from interfering with or even negating diplomatic initiatives." This hardly sounds like a sustained search. But Cooper does not ascribe this recurrent military sabotage to calculation or conspiracy; "either of these would at least have had the merit of reflecting some thinking on the subject at high levels of the government. But there was none. . . . Instead, there was inertia, lethargy, and a reluctance 'to upset the President.'" He concludes "that there were those at the top level who had no interest in any new ideas, approaches, or initiatives with respect to negotiations. The current operative concept was 'Hit 'em again, but harder.'" When Clark Clifford pushed too hard for peace in the fall of 1968, President Johnson even struck his name from the distribution list for negotiation cables.

The Lost Crusade does not cast much light on the disagreement between Clifford and President Johnson over the source of the initiative for the partial bombing halt announced March 31, 1968. It does make clear, however, the purposeful role of the Saigon government in stalling the Paris negotiations just before the election. This leads him into a brilliant disquisition on the question of "leverage"—

that is, the ability of a large state to control the policy and performance of a client state by threatening the cancellation of favors. Washington's only conclusive sanction, he points out, was total withdrawal; "and as the size of our forces, and therefore the extent of our commitment to our commitment, increased, this sanction became less and less credible. In short, our leverage declined as our involvement deepened."

Brooding over the whole text, of course, is the question of causality—"the 'why' of it," as Aristotle said. Cooper's approach to this question is discursive and random. "In retrospect," he writes, "it seems clear that our original commitment to Vietnam in 1954 was in response to what was then a felt national interest, but our involvement in scale and cost eventually outran any requirement we may have felt we had to preserve a non-Communist regime in Saigon." He attributes Eisenhower's commitment to "an American crusade to save the world from Communism." Kennedy, he thinks, saw the Russian support of national-liberation wars as "the only remaining obstacle to an East-West modus vivendi," and therefore took Vietnam as an opportunity to persuade Moscow that such a policy was dangerous and unpromising. Johnson was "too much the 'hawk' to do what had to be done to make peace, and too much the 'dove' to permit the kind of military action that would have risked a world war." As for Nixon, Cooper frankly cannot understand why he persists in repeating the errors of the past.

The Lost Crusade recapitulates the bewildering litany of explanations Presidents have given as to why we are in Vietnam. Cooper points out that these explanations were not "the same objective" in different words but "were different objectives, each calling for separate tactics and strategies" and concludes that the one legitimate motive was "to permit the Vietnamese to choose freely their future course." This is not really very convincing.

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Though Cooper calls this goal "at once both idealistic and realistic and therefore consistent with the traditions of American foreign policy," and though it would obviously be nice for the Vietnamese, and all other peoples, to choose freely their future course, he does not tell us why it was in the American national interest to intervene militarily to attain that goal in this particular country.

One wishes that he had attempted a better focused analysis of the causes of Vietnam. *The Lost Crusade* implicitly rejects one fashionable explanation—that the Indochina war was a manifestation of the quest of American capitalism for world hegemony. George Lichtheim wrote recently, "No one is ever going to claim that the United States got involved in Vietnam because it wanted the area's markets. The motivation was plainly political and strategic." But Lichtheim underestimated the fatuity of the American left, which makes precisely this claim. Cooper, in 559 pages of candid and disenchanting narrative, never once mentions any pressure by any American business interest to prosecute or intensify the Vietnam war. More sophisticated exponents of the economic thesis contend that, because defeat in Vietnam would have jeopardized American markets and investments throughout the Third World, economic interest therefore compelled Washington to a course of ruthless counter-revolution. Even in this form the thesis fails—first, because no one can demonstrate the mode by which the American business community induced the government to intervene in Vietnam; and secondly because two-thirds of American overseas investments and markets are in rich and industrialized nations and not at all in the poverty-stricken countries of the Third World.

If we take Aristotle's categories, the "material" cause of our involvement was, first, our overwhelming military power and, second, alas, the Kennedy-McNamara multiplication of "options" through the strategy of

graduated deterrence—that is, the military capacity, carefully evolved after 1960, to respond to threat at the level of the threat. If we had retained the Eisenhower-Dulles "massive retaliation" defense posture, we would probably not have had the non-nuclear capacity to do much in Vietnam, and it seems unlikely that we would have dropped the bomb.

Aristotle himself was not clear as to the difference between his second and fourth categories—"formal" and "final" causes; they "are," he writes, "as it were, one." One can discern in the Vietnam case a number of causes proceeding from the pattern of our conceptions for the sake of which the intervention took place: the doctrinaire execution of a perfectly honorable belief in a universal peace system; the old missionary commitment to America's regenerative mission to suffering mankind; the liberal faith, fortified by the post-war experience of military occupation, in the American capacity to instruct and rebuild other nations; the quite real menace of Stalinist communism and the absolutist counter-ideology of anti-communism.

As for the "efficient" cause, "the primary source of the change," the specific pressure leading to intervention and escalation, this appears to have been our military establishment, created in the Second World War, nourished in the cold war and at every stage the decisive influence in stepping up the Indochina war—an influence operating not at the bidding of American capitalism, but as an independent force in its own right and finding in Presidents Johnson and Nixon complaisant instruments for its purpose. This surely was "what makes of what is made and what causes change of what is changed."

One wishes, I say, that Cooper had turned his attention to a more rigorous explanation of this most ghastly episode in our history. Still, we can be grateful for a lucid and illuminating account of the diplomacy of intervention and extrication. ■